The Mother Roots of Jesus: Tamar

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Bendersville & Wenksville United Methodist Churches

**Matthew 1:1-3; Genesis 38:27-30**



Okay, quick show of hands: how many of you just absolutely love delving into and hanging out in biblical genealogies?

Mmm hmm. That’s what I thought. I don’t even really like spending much time looking at my *own* family’s genealogy. Even though there is some fun stuff in there – like on my dad’s side we are descended from the Vikings. And we think we may be related to Benedict Arnold. And we are pretty sure we are directly descended from King Edward I and a little bit removed from Queen Elizabeth II. And I have been told that on my mom’s side we are related – distantly - to George Washington. I’ve never gone back to confirm that or to see how, but it is fun to claim. But aside from these big names, all the names stacking up on paper start to blend together and get a little bit dull after awhile.

Which is why it is so tempting for us to just kind-of skim through and skim over or skip entirely the genealogies in the Bible. They’re just not that interesting.

Except that sometimes, once in a rare while, they surprise us.

During the series of Advent this year we are going to be hanging out in Matthew’s genealogy of Jesus. But before you start making plans to do your Christmas shopping on Sunday mornings, take heart. There is actually some really fascinating stuff hiding in this list of hard-to-pronounce Old Testament names.

So when we look at an Old Testament genealogy, what was most important for the people at the time was the lineage that passed down through the firstborn male. Generally-speaking, with very few exceptions, the firstborn was the one who got the birthright, who carried down the family’s name and legacy. That’s part of why the story of Jacob and Esau is such a big deal in the book of Genesis – Esau flippantly trades his birthright for a bowl of soup and then Jacob steals his father’s blessing, effectively writing Esau out of the family story. And if you will notice, even though Esau was the firstborn son, he is not the one named here. Abraham is the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob. And then after Jacob, even though a lot of chapters at the end of Genesis are dedicated to talking about Jacob’s son Joseph, who was one of his younger sons, here in the genealogy it is only the firstborn – Judah – who is named (and then just in passing, it notes that Judah had some brothers). And then it starts to get a little bit interesting because it names not one, but *two* sons of Judah – Perez and Zerah. Perez and Zerah. Perez and Zerah were twins, and as we saw back with Jacob and Esau when Jacob was born clutching onto Esau’s heel, almost like he is trying to pull him back into the womb so that he can get ahead, there seemed to be a little bit of a wrestling match between these two boys as they are being born. Perez was actually born first, but before Perez was born Zerah’s arm stuck out first so there was a little bit of confusion over who was actually the firstborn.

Except that neither of them was actually the firstborn. They were the first and second born sons of their *mother*, but their *father*, Judah, who is the one who actually counts when it comes to the lineage, had three older sons who are not named.

But do you notice who else *is* named here, which is unusual? The mother, Tamar.



It’s not often that we see women named in the genealogies. And usually when we do, it is for a very specific purpose. The writer is trying to make a point.

In Matthew’s genealogy we actually see five women named. *[Progressive Image]*



We have Tamar, and then Rahab, Ruth, Uriah’s wife, or Bathsheba, and then finally, Mary the mother of Jesus. There’s a lot that we can say about each of these women – and we will. We are going to take a week looking at each one of them – but there are some common threads weaving throughout their stories that are worth mentioning here.

* First, with the exception of Mary, none of these women are of Israelite descent. Every one of them is a foreigner. So while Matthew takes great pains to describe how Jesus is directly descended from King David, he also notes that this isn’t just a story of Israel and Israel’s people. You and I are woven into this story as well.
* And second, the stories of every one of these women are complicated, and messy. Rahab was a prostitute. Ruth was a young widow, and all the men around her kept dying. Bathsheba was the married love interest of King David. And Tamar – we’ll get to her. But let’s suffice it to say that her story doesn’t usually show up in children’s Bibles. Every one of them found themselves in incredibly dangerous and vulnerable places – even Mary, who could have been put to death by Joseph for finding herself pregnant out of wedlock.
* There are entire branches of theology dedicated to explaining how Jesus came into the world without sin, and therefore how Mary herself must have been without sin, trying to maintain an aura of purity around Jesus. But Matthew sort-of throws all of that to the wind from the very beginning, saying “here is the story of how Jesus came to be.” And then he starts naming names. Jacob the man who cheated his brother. Judah the man who sold his own brother into slavery. Perez and Zerah who could never agree on who was born first. Tamar and Rahab and Ruth and Bathsheba the vulnerable outsiders with no legal standing and complicated stories.
* Jesus is not being born into a sterile, perfect, place of purity. Jesus himself has the Vikings and the Benedict Arnolds in his history, along with the Kings and Queens and George Washingtons. Jesus is born into the mess and is not exempt from the mess. He is taking on the messiness and the complicated stories so that he can help us wrestle with and embrace and overcome our one places of messiness and complexity. Because let’s face it – we all have them.

So with all that being said, let’s get to the story of Tamar.



Tamar is probably the least well-known of the women in Matthew’s genealogy. And I can probably count on one finger the number of times that I have heard her preached on. In fact, when I read the story, as many times as I have read Genesis for whatever reason this story never really stuck in my memory.

For one thing, it’s sort-of sandwiched in the middle of another, much bigger story. In chapter 37 we hear the story of Jacob’s son Joseph and his dreams, and his pretty coat, and of Joseph’s brothers getting jealous and annoyed and selling him into slavery. And then we cut to today’s story, and then in chapter 39 we cut back again to the story of Joseph in Egypt. In fact, there is one commentator who even comes right out and says “there really seems to be no point to this story, and for that reason my discussion of it will be brief.”

So here’s the story: Jacob’s firstborn son Judah has three sons: Er, Onan, and Shelah. Jacob’s firstborn, Er, gets married to a Canaanite woman named Tamar. We don’t know much about Er, except that he must have been a pretty bad dude because we are told that he was “wicked in the sight of the Lord” and therefore, God smited him.

Now, the tradition of the time for the firstborn son is that that if you have a wife and you die, then if you have brothers your oldest brother will marry your wife. And any children that your brother and your wife conceive will be considered your children, and therefore, the children will receive the inheritance that was originally intended for you. However, if your wife never has any children, that inheritance will pass instead to your brother.

So after Er dies, Onan takes Tamar as his wife. However, he’s looking at this inheritance thing and thinking “I wanna keep that all to myself.” So he goes to great lengths to keep Tamar from getting pregnant and having what would be legally considered his brother’s children – even if biologically they would be his children. And if you want to read this R-rated story on your own and delve into all the juicy details, feel free.

So God looks at Onan and says “you’re as wicked as your brother! ZAP.” And Onan dies too.

So Judah looks at Tamar and looks at his two dead sons and his first thought isn’t “God zapped my two wicked sons” – his first thought is “Tamar did it.” Legally, Tamar would have been entitled to marry the third son, Shelah. But evidently Shelah was still pretty young. And Judah was worried that if Shelah married Tamar, he would end up dead too. So he sent Tamar to live as a widow in her father’s house, promising her that when Shelah was old enough, she could marry him. But really, he had no intent of ever allowing Tamar to marry his only surviving son. He was never going to do right by her.

This put Tamar in a horrible position. Because at the time, a woman’s economic and social position only came through her husband. A widow was not entitled to any of her husband’s estate – and a widow without children would have nobody to care for her. And what’s more, because she was technically betrothed to Shelah, she would not be allowed to marry anybody else. So Judah essentially sentenced Tamar to a life of poverty with no way out.

So here’s where the story really starts to get interesting. The years pass. Judah’s wife dies. And when Tamar hears that Judah is going to a big sheepshearer’s conference in town, Tamar dresses up as a prostitute and sits outside the city gates. Judah sees her, and not recognizing her as his daughter-in-law he propositions her and sleeps with her and she conceives twins. As payment for her “services” he promises her a young sheep from his flock – but because he doesn’t have a great track record for keeping his promises she asks for his signet and cord and his staff as collateral. This would have been the Ancient Near Eastern version of his driver’s license and social security card – he gave her his very identity.

So when he goes home he sends a friend with a young sheep to go look for “the temple prostitute” – to pay her and to get his stuff back, but nobody can find her. A few months later somebody comes to tell Judah that Tamar is pregnant because she had been “playing the whore.” Still not putting two and two together, Judah is angry that Tamar had not been playing the part of the grieving widow and had illegally gotten pregnant while she was betrothed to his son. He orders that she be put to death, and Tamar responds by sending his signet and cord and staff back to him, in essence saying, “you are the father.”

Judah is stunned. And finally – probably years too late – he realizes that he had put her in an impossible situation and that he was the one who had been the jerk.

And that’s it. That’s all we hear about Tamar. We don’t know if she ever married Shelah in the end; we don’t know if Shelah ended up getting the inheritance, or if one of the twins got it – we do know that it is the twins that are listed in Matthew’s genealogy – not Shelah – so maybe…just maybe things ended up okay for Tamar in the end. But we really just don’t know.



Here’s what we do know: families can be complicated. Families are made up of people, and people are messy and broken. Grieving fathers will sometimes be driven more by grief and fear than by honor and respect for their vulnerable daughters-in-law. Trickery and deceit are realities in many families. Children sometimes come as surprises. Siblings don’t always get along. Family members are, on occasion, motivated by greed rather than by love. Loved ones may die unexpectedly, leaving a mess behind. People who are stuck in particularly vulnerable and dangerous situations may do questionable things just to survive.

This is the dark side of life, the painful side of life – the side of life that we would rather skip over and forget is in our Bibles. This is the kind of story that we don’t tend to commit to memory because we would rather it not be there. It’s steamy and exciting – it would make a great movie – but it’s uncomfortable. We wonder, alongside the commentator that I read this week, “what’s the point of this? It doesn’t advance the story, it doesn’t really give us any information that we need as we read the rest of scripture” – it just sort-of leaves us saying, “well, that was…interesting…” – and it leaves me as a pastor thinking “how in the world are we going to read this in church? Oh, I know! Let’s just read the part about the babies being born. Babies are happy.”



But maybe that’s the point. There are pieces of each of our stories that *are* messy. That we would much rather write out of our own stories and pretend did not happen. There might be people in our lives that complicate our stories – and it may feel at times like these people are an unnecessary nuisance at best, or a source of extreme pain, at worst. Life would be so much cleaner if we could just sever this relationship or pretend that that person did not have the impact on us that they did. Or maybe God could just go ZAP and fix the situation – although as we see in this story, God ZAPPING people didn’t tend to make things any better.

These parts of our lives *do* exist, though. They are messy, and uncomfortable, and sometimes embarrassing, and often painful, but they are part of life. These pieces of our lives shape our stories, for better or for worse. And while we may not always see a point to them – while we may not always see God’s hand working through them or bringing something beautiful out of them, we can take heart in knowing that these stories are a part of Jesus’s story too. Jesus was born into the mess, with brokenness and pointlessness and strangeness and questionable ethical decisions shaping his family tree as well. When God came to dwell with us, God took on all of the weird broken complexities of our lives so that God could first help us navigate them, and ultimately to conquer them.